

LEGACY

Illuminating the Past, Informing the Present, Inspiring the Future



MURRAE FRENG

Murrae Freng, a graduate of Concordia College, Moorhead, received his Masters of Music Education degree from MacPhail School of Music, Minneapolis. His career included teaching positions at Brooten and Alexandria high schools, Assistant to the Executive Director of the Minnesota State High School League and later its Executive Director, as well as Senior Choir Director at Calvary Lutheran Church, Golden Valley and Conductor of the Minneapolis Apollo Club. Murrae is a charter member of ACDA and a 63 year member of MMEA, serving a term as President as well as Editor of the *Gopher Music Notes*.

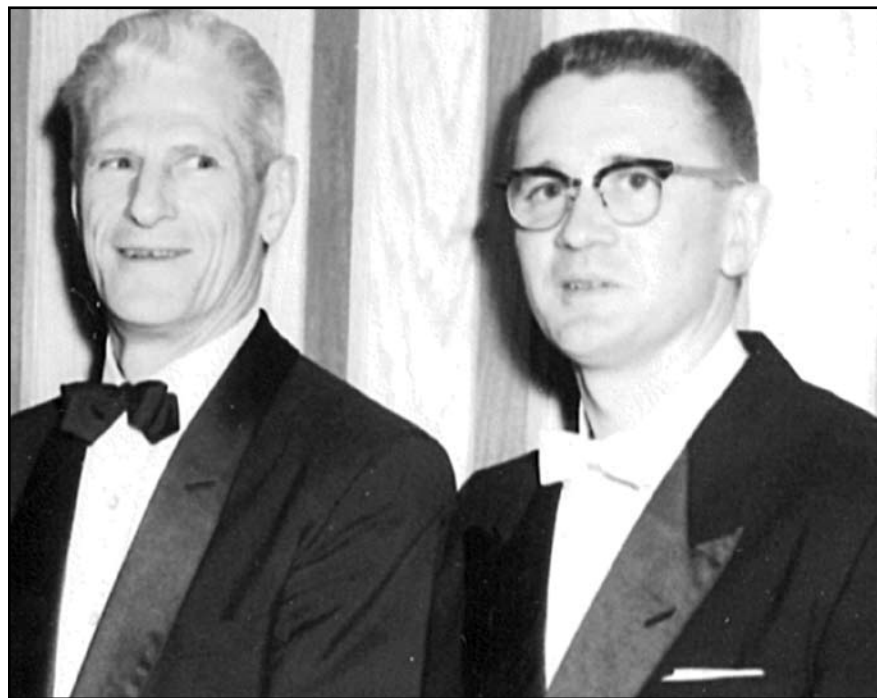
Mr. Freng has been widely recognized for achievements in the field of choral music. In 1986, he was presented the F. Melius Christiansen Award from ACDA-MN. In 1987, he was inducted as one of six charter members of the Minnesota Music Educators Association Hall of Fame. Four years later, in 1991,

Murrae was one of ten charter members inducted into the Minnesota State High School League Hall of Fame. Last year, he received a special award and recognition at ACDA's 50th anniversary gathering in Oklahoma City and was also named to the Alexandria Public Schools Education Foundation Hall of Fame.

Editor's Note: The following is a condensed transcript of an interview with Murrae Freng conducted by his friend and former student, Bruce Phelps. The interview begins with a brief statement from Mr. Phelps. Bruce Phelps is Minister of Music at Christ the King Lutheran Church in New Brighton and is founder and artistic director of the Northern Lights Chorale.

We had just finished our final choral concert of my junior year and it was announced that Murrae Freng would be leaving Alexandria to take a position with the Minnesota State High School League. I was devastated! Mr. Freng was my favorite teacher. Choir was my favorite class. What would happen to our choral program now? How could we survive without Mr. Freng?

What Murrae Freng accomplished in 13 years at Jefferson High School earned him the honor of being named to the Alexandria Public Schools Education Foundation Hall of Fame. But what he has done beyond Alexandria sets him apart as a true leader and champion of choral music in Minnesota and beyond. Murrae is loved and respected by all who know him. He is not only an advocate of choral music but also of today's youth. While with the Minnesota State High School League, he continued his efforts to improve upon the quality of all student high school activities. He believes in them and still gets excited when talking about an outstanding student violinist or a vocalist he once heard. He is a friend and a mentor and I have been blessed by his influence in my life. It is a privilege and an honor for me to share with you some of his thoughts and memories.



Murrae Freng and Olaf Christiansen in 1961. Olaf was a clinician at the Alexandria Choral Festival that year.

Bruce Phelps: When did you first decide to become a choral director?

Murrae Freng: My answer is quite similar to that of Wayne Kivell as he responded to this question last fall when interviewed for the first in this series of articles. In Pelican Rapids High School I was an instrumentalist and we were fortunate to have an outstanding band director, Orrin Torrison, a Luther College graduate. I vividly recall him taking a group of us to Fergus Falls to hear the Luther band – to play in that band and to become a band director became my immediate goal. However, finances dictated otherwise.

Concordia College was less than 50 miles from home so I enrolled there and found a spot at the end of the row in the trumpet section. This was the fall of 1942 and just a few weeks into my freshmen year, several students were called into the military. Several were members of the Concordia Choir. Paul J. Christiansen was teaching the Ear Training class in which I was enrolled, and after class one day he stopped me and suggested I might be interested in auditioning for a spot in his tenor section. My response was simply that I was in the band. He said to think about it. When I mentioned this to friends in the dorm they reminded me that Paul J. was the head of the department and that I would have other classes from him in future semesters. The implication was that my career might be better served by giving further consideration to this opportunity. When he approached me again a few days later and assured me, that at least for this year, I could be in both groups, I quickly became a first tenor in the Concordia Choir. It didn't take me long to realize how fortunate I was. My life was changed forever!

BP: Tell me about your first teaching assignment.

MF: The Brooten Public School was a perfect place for me to begin a music teaching career. Brooten was a very small school with K-12 all in one building and class sizes of 25-35. This was a community with a very strong choral tradition built under the capable leadership of my predecessors Carl Sutherland and Adolph White. I directed the entire vocal and instrumental programs, K-12, as well as teaching 7th and 8th grade social studies. We hadn't heard about "free periods" or "prep periods" in 1946. The choir met every day for a half hour – the last half hour, period one on Monday, period 2 on Tuesday, period 3 on Wednesday, etc. Period 6 was a full hour each day for band. Classroom teachers didn't seem to mind this disrupting schedule because almost every student sang in the choir and thus it gave them a half hour "free time" each day.

Brooten was a great starting place. Located on Highway 55 and about equal distance from Moorhead to the northwest and Northfield to the southeast, it became a favorite coffee or lunch stop for both Paul J. Christiansen and his brother Jake, Concordia's basketball and football coach. To the best of my knowledge, I was one of only five men who had the opportunity to play varsity basketball for Jake and sing for brother Paul J. the same year. Those World War II years brought this unusual opportunity. (By the way, Maurice Skones [longtime director at Pacific Lutheran University and the University of Arizona] was also one of the "choir five.")

It was at one of those lunch stops that Jake had his dad, F. Melius, with him. Even though the elder Dr. Christiansen was having serious health problems at the time, they were willing to stop at the school and listen to our choir for 15-20 minutes. What an impact his brief comments had on me and those students.

One other tool that proved highly successful for me during my years in Alexandria was initiating an annual clinic/concert with guest conductors.

BP: Was your next teaching job then at Alexandria?

MF: Yes, and it was not an easy decision but certainly the right one. Brooten had become very special for it was there that I met Helen. We were married there and two of our three daughters were born in the nearby Greenwood hospital. But, the opportunity to teach in a "large" school was too good to turn down. Plus, an increase in salary. My starting salary in Brooten was \$2,400 for 11 months, including weekly band concerts in the week during June and July. So, it was on to Alexandria and now \$3,600 (this was in 1952). Wow – \$300 each month!! In addition, this position was vocal music director and no responsibility for the instrumental program.

BP: Did Alexandria have the good choral tradition that you first experienced in Brooten?

MF: Alexandria was recognized as being a center for good music in this area of the state, not only a good choral tradition. The instrumental program was particularly strong and I quickly realized that I would need to be particularly active in recruiting, especially boys, if the choral program were to reach the same stature. I must admit to being somewhat discouraged to discover only nine boys registered for choir when I arrived to start the 1952 school year.

BP: What did you do about it? Any advice to young teachers who might find themselves in similar situations?

MF: Fortunately, a couple of the boys were excellent athletes. One was a star on a highly rated football team. He was instrumental in convincing several of his teammates to adjust their schedule and we ended up with an impressive back row!! Advice on recruiting?

Go after the key athletes. They make good choir members. They know how important it is to work together as a team. Once that trend starts, it will build quickly. I'm a strong believer in the value of ensembles in developing the choir program. Have as many of these as possible and especially a boys quartet or octet. Have them appear at community functions, service clubs, etc. The younger students will want to be a part of such a program.

What Murrae Freng accomplished in 13 years at Jefferson High School earned him the honor of being named to the Alexandria Public Schools Education Foundation Hall of Fame.

BP: Understand that I do want to delve a little deeper into how you perceive building and sustaining a successful choral program today, but let me change the focus of this interview for a few minutes. Tell me – who were the choirs and conductors that inspired you in those early years of your career and that continue to inspire you today?

MF: Believe me, there have been many, but for me it all begins with F. Melius Christiansen. It was obvious that he had a burning desire for perfection of the choral art. He would never settle for less than complete dedication and effort to achieve this. In my judgment, he, more than any one single person, is the reason choral programs in Minnesota and the upper Midwest have developed to the level we now enjoy.

Next would come his two sons, Olaf and Paul J. It was my good fortune to sing for Paul for four years and serve as a student director and tenor section leader for a couple of those years. I remember him as a great experimenter with vowel sounds, as one with a tremendous ear – pitch blend and balance – he always seemed to be right on top of it. He also possessed a unique way of bringing you back to reality when you began to think you were pretty good. Let me give you an example of that.

First semester conducting class, I received a B for a grade. When I discovered that another member of the class (who I didn't think was all that good) received an A, I was more than a little upset. I questioned Mr. C. and he slowly and quietly reminded me that I was doing a good job but had I noticed the remarkable improvement in the A student in just this brief semester? I got the message.

Yes, there have been many who have inspired me and continue to inspire me even today. I hesitate naming others because I'm sure I would fail to include them all. I must use this opportunity to tell you about one particularly inspiring moment. I attended the 50th anniversary convention of the MENC in St. Louis in 1956. Curt Hansen's Brainerd High School Choir performed in the key concert session of this convention to a packed house. It was a flawless performance, including one of the Bach Motets. I still cannot find words to adequately describe the impact this had on me. How did he get a high school choir to this level of perfection? I had to find out and soon called him to see if he would share the reasons for his success with me and my choir. A combined concert soon provided the avenue for accomplishing this and fostered a very special friendship that exists to this day. (As an aside, I doubt there were two better walleye fishermen in central Minnesota during those years!)

BP: Having been a student in Alexandria during that era, I'm wondering if this was the start of what became known as the "Group of Six"?

MF: Yes, and you became acquainted with those six long before you thought about being a choral conductor. This gets us back to ideas on how to build and sustain a solid choral program. The success Curt Hansen and I experienced with our combined concerts evolved into meetings with Paul Montan (Wadena), Lester Dehlin (Staples), Paul Brandvik (Pelican Rapids) and Vernon Opheim (Moorhead). We decided to meet once each month, work with the host choir and share ideas. The local director and choir would provide a 15-20 minute mini concert, after which each of the other directors would have 15-20 minutes to work on one pre-determined selection. After the clinic, we had dinner (our wives were always included – a must!) with an honest and open critique of the session. We quickly learned it was best to leave our ego at the door. WHAT A LEARNING EXPERIENCE! There were others that joined us from time to time including Ames Dahl (St. Cloud), Harold Skilbred (Glenwood), and Cornell Runestad (Princeton). Paul J. Christiansen joined us on occasion and insisted on calling us the "Crazy Eight." Maybe a bit on the crazy side, but it worked for us.

The benefits also included finding new literature and sharing ideas for building and sustaining our programs. One quick example: Vern Opheim had formed a Caroler Group of 16 to be active in the community during the Christmas season. His success encouraged me to form such a group and we performed often at hospitals, rest homes, service clubs, and you name it. It pleases me to see that 45+ years later, the Alexandria Carolers are a fixture in their ensemble program, in great demand and a major factor in enhancing the standing of choral music in that community.

BP: You mentioned finding new literature. What changes have you noted in programming in recent years?

MF: A most dramatic change is the extensive use of 20th and 21st century music. This is good, unless the percentage destroys the balance between the old and the new. As Wayne Kivell put it, “we’ve forgotten our roots.”

BP: There must be certain “chestnuts” that you would recommend to help achieve that balance in programming. Pick four or five.

MF: I don’t think I can limit it to four or five because so many immediately come to mind. I would want to include:

- *O Day Full of Grace* – F. M. Christiansen (My all-time favorite!)
- *Beauty in Humility* – F. M. Christiansen
- *Prayer to Jesus* – Oldroyd
- *Misericordias Domini* – Durante
- *Die Mit Tränen Säen* – Schein
- *Advent Motet* – Schrek
- *O Praise Ye God* – Tschaikowsky
- *Spring* – Grieg, arr. Paul J. Christiansen
- *Ceremony of Carols* – Britten
- *O Come and Let us Worship* – Gretchaninoff

Dr. Archie Jones, University of Texas, was our guest in 1955. It was at that time he and several other choral leaders were discussing the idea of forming the American Choral Directors Association...Little did we know that after 50 years, the membership would number over 20,000.



Murrae Freng with William Dawson (1960). William Dawson was a guest clinician at the Alexandria Choral Festival in 1960 and again in 1965.

BP: After 19 years as a high school choral director, you made a career switch right at the end of my junior year. Tell me about that.

MF: First of all, it was totally unexpected. During the early 1960s there was considerable discussion amongst school administrators and music teachers as to whether or not the music contest program should be administered by the Minnesota State High School League. Prior to this time, the program was conducted by the Minnesota Public School Music League. This organization had an almost identical structure and Dr. Paul Oberg, University of Minnesota, served as the executive director. He did an admirable job with very limited funds. Financial struggles, together with conflicts in scheduling between music contest/festivals and spring athletic events, resulted in an extensive study by a committee of school administrators and music teachers. In 1965, the High School League added music to its family of sponsored activities and immediately sought applicants for an addition to the executive staff. Several key school administrators encouraged me to apply for this position. I somewhat reluctantly did so, was selected and began an exciting career change.

BP: Didn't you miss the daily excitement of working with a high school choir?

MF: Of course!! In fact, I missed it so much that within a few months I applied for and was fortunate enough to be selected as Senior Choir Director at Calvary Lutheran Church in Golden Valley as well as Director of the Minneapolis Apollo Club. Five years later the High School League Executive Director died very suddenly. I was selected as his replacement. The responsibilities of this office made it impossible for me to continue as an active choir director but I continued to find time to attend almost every MMEA and ACDA annual convention. When early retirement became a good option, I enjoyed nearly 20 years of helping with All State auditions and adjudicating contests in nearly every area of the state.

BP: I'd like to come back to your thoughts on how to build and sustain a successful high school choral program today. You mentioned the importance of a strong ensemble program and your gatherings of the "Group of Six." Any other secrets?

MF: No secrets! I can only tell you what worked for me. One of the key ways is to become involved in MMEA and ACDA and attend the clinic/conventions. I'm still doing that even though completely retired as an active director. Why? Because I'm still learning. I doubt I ever leave a choir concert, contest or rehearsal, without having picked up something new or being reinforced by something old.



The infamous "Group of Six," plus one. (From Left to Right: Les Dahlin, Curt Hansen, Paul J. Christiansen, Vern Opheim, Murrae Freng, Cornell Runestad, and Paul Brandvik.) Les Dehlin followed Murrae in Alexandria and was there until he retired. Curt Hansen went to work for Schmitt Hall and McCreary Music Publishers and led choral clinics all over the country. Vern Opheim wound up at UMD and directed choirs there until he retired. Cornell Runestad was choral director at Wayne State University in Wayne, NE until he retired and Paul Brandvik wound up at Bemidji State University until he retired. Early in their careers, they all taught high school choral music in a relatively close geographical area.

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One other tool that proved highly successful for me during my years in Alexandria was initiating an annual clinic/concert with guest conductors. Our band director, Vince DiNino, and I annually brought nationally known conductors to our community for two intensive days of rehearsals with the band and the choir. The climax of the event was a joint concert. This proved to be a most valuable learning experience for our students and as much, if not more, for us directors.

Space does not permit me to tell all of what these experiences did for me, but I do want to pay tribute to two in particular. William Dawson was our guest on two of these clinics. As a result, he and his wife, Cecile, became two of our very dearest friends. We were privileged to spend time with them in their home in Tuskegee, Alabama, and they in ours, both in Alexandria and in the Minneapolis area. Time with him at the ACDA conventions was also very special.

Dr. Archie Jones, University of Texas, was our guest in 1955. It was at that time he and several other choral leaders were discussing the idea of forming the American Choral Directors Association. One of their goals was to find 100 choral directors (preferably one high school and one university) director from each state. He invited me, Curt Hansen

and Dr. Olaf Christiansen to represent Minnesota. Little did we know that after 50 years, the membership would number over 20,000. The 50th anniversary of ACDA was celebrated at the convention in Oklahoma City in March of 2009 and the charter members were honored at a very special banquet. Only 17 charter members were still living at that time and four were able to attend. It was a very special day for me.

BP: Probably time to wrap this up! You have seen and been a participant in the development of choral music in Minnesota and watched it grow into a position of national prominence. Do you have any final comments you would like to share with us?

MF: Maybe a couple of things. I'm pleased to be able to say I was one of five who conceived the idea and helped establish the **FMC Endowment Fund**. We recently reached our initial goal of half a million dollars and as a result now annually provide some valuable assistance to young choral directors as they continue choral music study. We must continue to build this fund. Every ACDA member should be a participant.

And now, Bruce, I'm most thankful for having been given this opportunity to review with you many of the exciting moments in my life that have occurred because of choral music. It has served to remind me that there are three things of which I am absolutely certain:

- 1) God has richly blessed Helen, me, and our family, and I try to remember to say THANKS for each new day;
- 2) I'm the best example of anyone you will ever know who always seems to be "in the right place at the right time."
- 3) Throughout my career I have enjoyed the good fortune of being consistently surrounded by people who make me look good.

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